

TAKING STEPS FORWARD FAITHFULLY AND SAFELY



***A Plan for Returning to In-Person
Worship in the Holston Annual
Conference during the COVID-19
Pandemic***



June 1, 2020 - First Edition

Table of Contents

1. An Important Message from Bishop Taylor.....	3
2. A Contextual Perspective.....	5
3. Our Theological Footing.....	7
4. A Biblical Perspective.....	8
5. Our Currents Steps.....	9
6. Our Preparation Steps.....	10
7. 4 Non-Negotiables.....	15
8. Our Permission Steps.....	16
9. Our Future Steps.....	19
10. Conclusion.....	20
11. Supplemental Documents and Links	
• Church Compliance Certification.....	21
• Worksheet for Protocol Planning.....	22
• Worship Checklist.....	25
• Links for More Information.....	28
• Covid-19 Task Force.....	29



A Message from Bishop Mary Virginia Taylor

June 1, 2020

My Dear Holston United Methodist Brothers and Sisters,

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.

This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you." John 14:15-17

After graduating from Candler School of Theology in 1975, I began serving as a clergy member of the Holston Conference. During these past 45 years, there has never been a time that compares with the challenges of the Covid-19 global pandemic. As the medical community has mobilized to address this health crisis, the church has attempted to adapt to unimagined changes that have become new realities.

Our hearts have broken as we have heard the stories of so many precious lives that have left us too soon. We have witnessed how the virus has spread through nursing homes, meat packing facilities, factories, agricultural communities, and yes even churches.

There seems to be some evidence the spread of the virus is slowing down because of social distancing and persons staying at home, but it continues to be a threat to the health and well-being of all people, in every age group. By its very nature the church is one of those places where the virus can be transmitted easily as we gather and express our love for one another through hugs, shaking hands, and singing. Our Church Family is those significant people in our lives that we need to be around.

Taking Steps Forward Faithfully and Safely represents the best information we currently have to guide us in beginning to reopen our church buildings. The most difficult decision I have made as an episcopal leader has been the suspension of all in-person worship services. No one loves to go to church more than I do, but in order to protect the health of our families, friends, and communities it has

been necessary for us to stay away from large gatherings. The message has been clear, “Do your part, Stay apart.”

I understand many of you have not agreed with the decisions the cabinet and I have made in response to this crisis. This has not been an easy time for anyone. We have made decisions based on the best information we could gather from medical professionals.

The guidelines we are providing in this document have been developed in consultation with medical experts and church leaders from our conference. They are members of our congregations familiar with our churches and the needs of our communities. As we continue to navigate through these uncertain times, I ask we continue to pray for all those who grieve and have been most impacted by this virus in the death of loved ones and/or the loss of employment. I am confident God will continue to accompany and guide us as we seek to take steps forward faithfully and safely. I am thankful for all the ways our churches and people continue to be the means of grace that the church alone provides. I am sure this is not the final word on how we will find our way beyond this pandemic. Our hope is always in Jesus who came so everyone would have life and have it in its fullest. May we continue to be His people and nothing less.

God’s grace, mercy, and peace is always more than sufficient,

Dindy Taylor

A Contextual Perspective

The Holston Annual Conference is comprised of churches in metropolitan areas, cities, towns, communities, and rural areas in three different states. The COVID-19 pandemic has hit each area in diverse ways. Some areas have had or are now experiencing high case levels while some areas have experienced lower case counts. What we know is the virus is real.



Over 100,000 deaths nationwide remind us of its potency. All ages can be affected and the people of the Holston Conference fall into all categories of risk. Many are in high risk, vulnerable populations. This includes people of advanced age, people with existing medical conditions, people in highly dense population centers and people in racial and ethnic categories that are disproportionately affected by the virus.

One of the challenges we face in the Holston Conference in taking steps forward faithfully and safely is the complexity of dealing with the differences in the state governments in Virginia, Tennessee, and Georgia. Each state government has reacted differently in dealing with this pandemic. That has created some angst in different parts of the Conference as states have “opened up” or are “opening up” in different timeframes. Questions have resonated throughout the Conference asking, “if the states can open up, why can’t our churches?”

We recognize it has been a long time since we last gathered in worship across the Conference on March 8th. In some ways, it feels like we have been on a prolonged Lenten journey. Wandering. Wondering. Searching. Discovering new life realizations. Praying.

Often, the term unprecedented is used to describe this pandemic, but even that has almost become cliché. And as we have faced and endured this time, all of us have been affected. All of us. Some have been nominally affected while

others have had lives turned upside down, especially those who have battled this unseen enemy and/or lost loved ones and friends in the battle. Just about everything has been different including how we have worshiped. When Bishop Taylor, like other UMC Bishops, mandated church buildings to be closed in the middle of March, no one foresaw the length of this journey. Discontinuing in-person worship has helped us love our neighbors well by keeping everyone safe. If you say, “well we have no or few cases,” be thankful. It shows this step has worked.

Many want to just “go back,” but it is not about going back. It is about taking steps forward faithfully and safely. As churches begin to think about returning to in-person worship services, what will worship look like? We know, it will definitely look different for a while longer. We cannot just return to how things were when we last gathered. The threat of COVID-19 is still real. Questions still linger about how it is spread and how people can be carriers without knowing it or showing any symptoms. Risk factors are also different. For example, passing a COVID-19 infectious person on the sidewalk is a low risk. Shaking their hands or touching their contaminated surfaces is a medium risk if you subsequently rub your eye or nose. Being in a room with them for an hour, especially if talking or singing, is a high risk for infectivity. Traveling outside home areas, especially if social distancing is not followed, is a risk for communal transmission.

Since we last gathered, things have changed. We have changed. Many churches have found new outlets for ministry, through social media, which we hope will continue as we step into the future. Yet before we can run free, we must learn to walk again. Like a baby learning to walk, we may wobble and stumble. We will slowly gain strength and confidence and get our feet under us. Then our steps will become less measured and less calculated. Our pace will quicken.

But we are not there yet. Our future steps depend not only on the behavior of the Coronavirus, but on our behavior as well. If we become reckless and diminish social distancing practices, a new wave of infections and deaths will cause us to lose traction. Consequently, if we push too far in reopening our buildings and resuming gatherings prematurely, we may unfairly force our more vulnerable members to choose between keeping themselves and others safe and participating in congregational life like everyone else. Many questions still abound, and the answers are not easily found or sometimes well received. We must keep in mind it is not just about us. It is about our witness to our communities and our reverence for the lives of those around us. It is also about our reverence to those who are still with us, who have paved the way and for those yet to hear God’s call on their lives.

So, where are we and what can we do?

Our Theological Footing

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?" These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise [God], my help and my God (Psalm 42:1-6a).

Lament. Longing. Hungering. Thirsting. Groaning. *When can we return? Can we even sing? Where is God?* The sacred memory of being God's faithful people in the 21st century bears all of the marks of the individual psalmist whose heart is aching, despairing even. What are we supposed to do when the ground is moving beneath us? What is the next faithful step?

Before answering what the next faithful step should be, there is another question with which we must struggle: *Why? Why are we the people of God anyway? What is the mission of Christ's Church? Why would God choose a fallen human race to respond to this world-wide coronavirus?*

Our sacred memory holds a key to our response: We are the people of God, because God so loved the world (John 3:16). The mission of Christ's Church is to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world (Matthew 28:16-20). And God chooses not so much a fallen human race but a Christ-redeemed people to respond faithfully to unimaginable challenge (1 Peter 2:9-10).

That is God's way now. It has always been God's way. Surely we are asking ourselves what we are learning from this God who assures us that we will never be left forsaken. So, let our hearts sing, because nothing can silence a heart which is in rhythm with the purposes of God. Despite our collective lament, in the final analysis, we hope in God. Indeed, whether gathered or scattered, we praise God, because that is who we are as disciples of Jesus. And nothing, not even a world pandemic, not even the gates of hell, will be able to stop God's people from lifelong praise.

A Biblical Perspective

A Re-imagining of Matthew 25:31-40 for the Church of 2020

“When Jesus returns, all the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was discriminated against and you worked for justice, I was vulnerable and you wore a mask to protect me, I disagreed with you and you did not write me off, I was isolated and you connected with me, I was scared and you comforted me, I was unemployed and you helped me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you discriminated against and worked for justice, or vulnerable and protected you? And when was it that we disagreed with you and did not write you off, or saw you isolated and connected with you? And when was it that we saw you scared or unemployed and cared for you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”

Our Current Steps

1. All church buildings in the Holston Conference are officially closed. However, as noted earlier, many churches are providing worship opportunities via an assortment of platforms including online worship through Facebook and YouTube, conference calls, DVD worship tapings, and on Zoom. Pastors, staff, and key volunteers are creating these worship and Bible Study experiences while maintaining current guidelines for social distancing in groups of less than 10 people.
2. Exceptions are food pantry ministries done outside, essential worship teams and IT personnel for live streaming and videotaping, childcare services for essential workers, (Contact your District Superintendent for more information), personnel needed to disinfect the building, count money, make deposits, collect mail, etc. These ministries must utilize strict safety and sanitation protocols and are only gathering to accomplish their essential, stated needs.
3. No other Annual Conference is fully open for worship yet. Each Conference has limitations currently in place.
4. While our hope was to return to in-person worship in the Conference as a whole, we have come to realize the COVID-19 virus is affecting different areas of the Conference in different ways and one size does not always fit all. We believe a more regionalized approach is the better step at this time. Therefore, what follows is the outline of a plan to take steps forward faithfully and safely. We have tried to leave room for some individual and church creativity in finding ways to let people visit their church, indoors or out, in ways that protect our public health.

Our Preparation Steps

1. Each congregation should organize a team to explore how to prepare for the next step.
2. Congregations may want to develop a method to survey its members to judge their readiness to return to worship.
3. Each congregation should begin to collect necessary supplies such as hand sanitizer (preferably in pump bottles), sanitizing wipes, and other necessary cleaning supplies. Please see the Worksheet for Protocol for Planning and Preparation for more details. *
4. Begin to collect face masks or coverings, either purchased or homemade, for those who fail to bring their own. *
5. Identify and develop the best communication methods for notifying your congregation of the details of your plan in preparation for returning.
6. Develop plans to begin to clean the building in anticipation of returning.
7. Check with the church insurance carrier for any special requirements.
8. Create necessary signage for entry and exit of the building as well as seating information.

** Indicates if you have trouble obtaining these, work with other churches to buy in bulk or contact your District Office.*

Below are requirements that churches must prepare for in order to resume in-person worship after receiving permission:

1. Churches should continue to maintain an online worship service presence and connection through live streaming, ZOOM meetings, video services, etc.
2. Persons in the vulnerable category of 65 and older or those who live with persons who fit into that category, should be encouraged to remain home and take advantage of online worship experiences.
3. Persons who have significant high-risk conditions should also be encouraged to remain at home.
4. Cloth masks will be worn by all participants while in church. The face coverings need not be surgical masks or N-95 respirators; these critical supplies must continue to be reserved for healthcare workers and other medical first responders.

Cloth face coverings should not be placed on young children under the age of two, anyone who has trouble breathing, or anyone who is unable to remove the mask without assistance (these persons should remain home at this time).

5. Holy Communion through intinction or with the use of individual cups/bread will not be administered in person until the threat of transmission is minimized. Proximity to those administering and those receiving communion poses an increased risk. Pre-made, self-service communion cups (with bread inside the flap) may be used if made available upon entry. This, however, will cause an increased burden on the cleaning of the sanctuary and may not be possible if multiple services are being conducted requiring thorough cleaning in-between services. Online Communion will still be permitted until such time as we determine when we can re-assemble with no restrictions.
6. Baptisms should be delayed until the restrictions are lifted to ensure safety of the families and the person being baptized. However, if necessary, they are to be approved in advance in consultation with the District Superintendent.
7. Use “no-touch” alternatives with:
 - Passing the Peace/Greeting Times.
 - Collection of offerings.
 - Use of Ushers/Greeters (to distribute masks or sanitizer, or to direct entry or exit).
 - Use of printed materials
 - Checking of temperatures which is optional.
 - Recording who is in attendance at each service.

In addition, all Bibles, attendance registers, and hymnals should be removed from the sanctuary. Congregants can bring their own Bibles. Bulletins should not be passed out but made available upon entry or put in the seats prior to the service. Bulletins should not be re-used. Coffee/Fellowship hours should be suspended until further notice.

8. Choirs should be suspended until further notice. The use of soloists or small groupings is allowed, but only with extended social distancing beyond 6 ft. For churches who utilize praise bands, those bands should be kept to the barest minimum participants, not a full band, and only with extended social distancing beyond 6 ft. *

9. Congregational singing should not be conducted until further notice because studies show that one of the easiest ways to spread aerosol transmission is singing. It is the same principal for why we are told to cough or sneeze into our sleeve. NOTE: Speaking and singing are placing the most risk on the gathered community.
10. Seating should be restricted to every other pew. Alternate pews should be roped off to ensure social distancing.
11. Families who live in the same household should sit together; this includes youth and children.
12. Children's moments may still be a part of worship. However, children should remain with their families while the children's message is being delivered. No handouts will be permitted.
13. Microphones should not be passed or shared during the service for any reason, for the sharing of joys and concerns, announcements, etc.
14. Elimination of a receiving line to greet persons exiting the sanctuary.
15. Great care, planning, and intentionality should be exercised for the creation of shorter services with no liturgical music and spoken hymns while remaining masked.
16. Altar calls and the "laying on of hands" are not allowed as they present a challenge to proper social distancing. Alternatives for providing pastoral care "in the moment" will need to be carefully discerned.
17. Pastors/preachers should wear a mask prior to the service. Once the service begins, they may remove their masks as long as they practice extended social distancing from the first row of congregants. This is allowed to offer better voice recognition as well as to accommodate those who are lip readers. *
18. If your sanctuary cannot accommodate the gathered congregation using these strict guidelines, consideration will need to be made for multiple, staggered worship services. Plans for sanitation of the sanctuary between services, and a mechanism will need to be created for who should attend a given service
19. It is absolutely essential each church develop a method to record attendance and a plan for how to notify others if someone in attendance tests positive for COVID-19.

** While it is not required, some churches may find it helpful to erect a clear plexiglass type barrier in front of any pulpit or podium or for those providing special music as a way to block the potential of aerosol transmission toward the congregation.*

Requirements for Small Groups, Sunday School, Bible Study, etc.

1. Continue to offer and encourage participation in online groups to maintain ministry to the most vulnerable population and provide ongoing opportunity for those who still feel uncomfortable with in-person gatherings.
2. Establish and maintain the same principles as stated above for every small group gathering.
3. In-person meetings should be restricted to a ten-person limit.

Requirements for Weddings and Funerals

1. In a limited reopening, weddings and funerals could be conducted utilizing the social distancing and precautionary measures outlined in this document.
2. Receiving lines and greeting of family members are prohibited. “No touch” alternatives will need to be clearly explained and utilized.

Requirements for Youth/Children’s Ministries

1. There should be no organized sports, camps, or other activities.
2. Playgrounds and other outside spaces should be closed to children and youth during this time.
3. Youth ministry coordinators/leaders should use technology to connect with youth in online gatherings.
4. Additional areas which should be considered:
 - Care for the mental health/anxiety of our youth should be considered in planning for opportunities for youth to interact within social distanced parameters.
 - Many youth have missed milestone events—proms, graduations, and end of the year awards ceremonies. The church’s creative recognition of these milestone events is important.

Requirements for Other Activities

1. In-person Vacation Bible Schools should be suspended for the summer. Some churches are being very creative and developing online VBS's.
2. Mission trips, which involve travel, should also be canceled. Working locally with essential ministry missions, food pantries, homeless shelters, and other ministries, which need volunteers, is encouraged with proper sanitation and social distancing.
3. Any fund-raising or social activities involving food preparation and distribution should be canceled. This would include, but not limited to, fund-raising dinners, covered-dish dinners, or food distribution through buffets. We have documented illustrations that volunteerism in these activities has created breeding grounds for the transmission of the virus.

4 NON-NEGOTIABLES

TO RESUME IN-PERSON WORSHIP

1

PROTECTIVE FACE MASK

Masks must be worn by church attendees. Those who are unable to wear masks, including children under two, anyone who has trouble breathing, or anyone who is unable to remove the mask without assistance, should remain home worshipping online.

2

SOCIAL DISTANCING

A minimum of six feet must be implemented in the seating of household participants. Please note, this greatly reduces the seating capacity of worship space, usually to about 20-25%. This needs to be calculated as you plan to resume services. Consider using every other row with congregants sitting in households six feet apart from one another.

3

ATTENDANCE

It is required to document everyone who is in attendance with their contact information for the purpose of being able to contact them if someone were to become sick or exposed.

4

CLEANING

Sanitizing and disinfecting are necessary for public spaces, especially high-touch places such as railings, door handles, seating, and restrooms. Hand sanitizer should be available throughout the building and no-touch trashcans should be used.

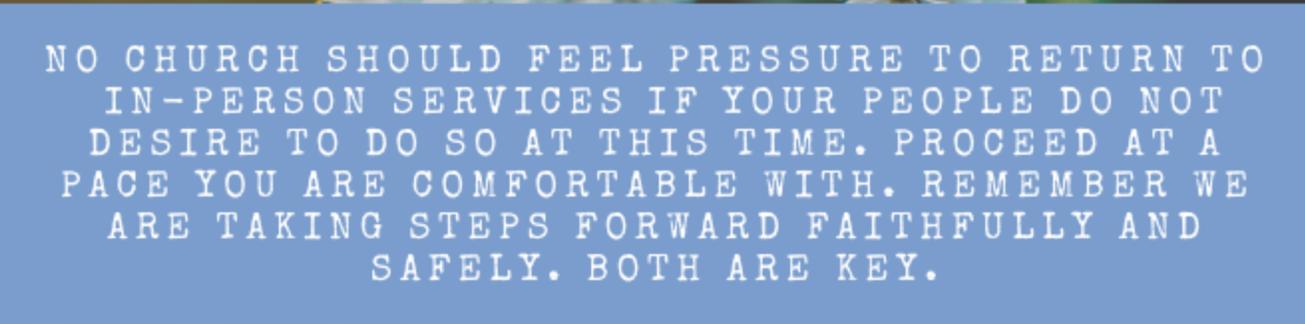
VISIT [HOLSTON.ORG](https://www.holston.org) FOR MORE INFORMATION

Our Permission Steps

Outdoor services and Drive-in services are permitted beginning June 14, 2020, as long as proper social distancing is established and maintained at all times. Your District Superintendent will also need to review your plan for these services, based on the guidelines listed below and then give their permission for such services. In the opinion of some medical personnel, the outdoor service may be the better alternative because it allows for wider spacing. The following guidelines should be used if offering either style of worship.

- Determine the space needed to accommodate the service. Will your yard or parking lot accommodate social distancing (6 feet or more) so you can leave spaces between household units or parking spots as applicable?
- Decide if you will use an FM transmitter or a PA system
- Ensure members are always only with persons from the same household or remain in their vehicles as applicable to the service.
- Use of lawn chairs or blankets on the ground during an outdoor service are allowed as long as social distancing is followed. If it is a drive-in service, people must remain in their vehicles at all times to maintain proper social distancing. They are encouraged to roll windows down at least occasionally to ensure air flow inside the vehicle.
- No restroom facilities will be open.
- Check with local law enforcement and notify them of the service.
- Check with your insurance carrier for any special requirements.
- Make sure noise levels are kept to a minimum and be respectful of any neighbors.
- Again, it is absolutely essential each church develop a method to record attendance and a plan for how to notify others if someone in attendance tests positive for COVID-19.
- Develop a way to receive a “touchless offering.”
- Participants older than two must wear face masks or coverings.
- Congregational singing is not allowed.
- Secure volunteers to direct parking and put up any necessary signs.
- Develop a Communication Plan to notify your members of the service time and guidelines.

- For those leading worship:
 - Maintain the recommended 6 ft distance at all times.
 - Minimize team needed for leading in worship.
 - Special music may be offered but the social distancing between the singer and the congregation should be increased beyond 6 ft.
 - Use a different microphone for every person leading worship.
 - If there are not enough microphones to avoid sharing, wipe each microphone with a disinfecting wipe thoroughly between uses.
 - Anything that will be touched by multiple users such as keyboards, music stands, sound boards, etc. must be disinfected after use.
 - Gloves and masks must be worn when setting up and tearing down equipment.
- Other Considerations: Persons exhibiting any signs of illness should not participate in any way in the drive-in worship experience.
 - Persons counting money must wear gloves and masks.
 - Persons who are sick should stay home.
 - Monitor weather conditions for excessive heat or rain.



NO CHURCH SHOULD FEEL PRESSURE TO RETURN TO
IN-PERSON SERVICES IF YOUR PEOPLE DO NOT
DESIRE TO DO SO AT THIS TIME. PROCEED AT A
PACE YOU ARE COMFORTABLE WITH. REMEMBER WE
ARE TAKING STEPS FORWARD FAITHFULLY AND
SAFELY. BOTH ARE KEY.

To receive permission to return to in-person worship inside a church building, a church must:

- Follow the guidelines listed in the Preparations Step.
- Complete the “Worksheet for Protocol Planning and Preparations.”
- Ensure your Protocol Planning and Preparation Team meets the requirements.
- Submit the worksheet with the documented plans to your District Superintendent following social distancing guidelines.
- Submit the signed church covenant to your District Superintendent.
- District Superintendents, after reviewing and discussing your plans, may give permission for your church to resume in-person worship. However, as we look at regionalized returning to in-person worship, part of each District Superintendents responsibility will be to know case volumes in their area. For instance, as we prepare this plan for publication, we have learned of several ‘hotspots’ and an uptick of cases in several areas of the Conference, which would prevent churches in those areas from opening right now. Just because you have done the work of the plan does not mean it is safe for a return to in-person worship in your area. Churches have to do the work of the plan and not expect the District Superintendent to let you slide on any part.
- District Superintendents will also create a database for each congregation’s plan.

Once these steps have been completed, and once the District Superintendent has reviewed your plan, and once the District Superintendent is confident it is safe to return in your area, a church could resume in-person worship inside the church building. We acknowledge some churches have already been working on their plans and may be ahead in the process. Conceivably though, given everything required, we would not see many churches opening before June 21 at the earliest. Some churches may choose to wait until July or even August. Once again, we want to move forward faithfully and safely.

Our Future Steps

The guidelines in this plan will be reviewed regularly and revised based on updated information and guidelines published by local and state authorities. Revisions and new guidelines will be communicated as they become available. Please know the work of the Task Force is not complete. We will continue developing this plan until the we can take the steps toward being fully open. However, we are not there yet and as we walk toward this goal our prayer is we can continue moving forward. But please understand, if conditions warrant in your area, we may have to become more restrictive again. Remember, it is not just about you.

Conclusion

In making this plan available, we acknowledge we have studied and drawn resources from several annual conferences as well as local entities and health departments. It is a collaborative effort. And yet, it is not a completed effort. The work of the Task Force will be on-going.

We also recognize there are strong feelings on every side in dealing with the issues surrounding COVID-19. We have heard from churches who are pushing to resume to in-person worship and from churches that are in no hurry to return. We also recognize many of our pastors are in high risk categories, and we call attention to that as churches take steps to returning to in-person worship.

Our great hope, and part of the reason for the covenant signed by the Church Council chair, Trustee chair and pastor, is that churches will reach consensus on the plan prior to stepping back into the building. It is abundantly clear, whether you are clergy or lay, you are eager to resume in-person worship and activity within your local church. It is also clear some churches are suffering economic hardship trying to meet their obligations to remain open and vital in mission and ministry. It is completely understandable many are frustrated over the need for us to move slowly, intentionally, and prayerfully. We must keep in mind our theological mandate to care for one another holistically in body, mind, and spirit. We need to proceed cautiously and carefully. We have already heard of too many stories and deaths about people who contracted COVID-19 at church.

It is essential for everyone in leadership, lay and clergy alike, to lead with a non-anxious presence and with a spirit of hopefulness. It is also important for leaders to lead, to not allow rumors or emotions to dominate the landscape, to help people understand the need for elevated safety precautions to avoid further transmission, and to call all of our people to walk deliberately and smartly into this “new normal” we will discover together.

It will not be an easy undertaking to reopen churches for worship and other activities. It will take much planning and preparation. We encourage you to form your Protocol Planning Team immediately. There is much to think about and much more to do. Throughout, you must remember this is not a time to cut corners, look for loopholes, or avoid necessary precautions. To only perform some of these functions eliminates the effectiveness of any measure taken.

Please know as you are “Taking Steps Forward Faithfully and Safely,” our prayers are with you and we ask God to bless your steps and your ministry.

Church Compliance Certification

Dear Church leaders,

As we are “Taking Steps Forward Faithfully and Safely” in our churches, it is absolutely critical the guidelines and requirements we have issued be widely communicated, well understood, and complied with each and every one of our churches.

We therefore ask you to covenant to the following:

- We have received, read, and understand the guidelines and requirements issued by Bishop Taylor with respect to reopening of church buildings.
- We have distributed these documents to all members of our Church Council.
- We understand compliance with these requirements is a life and death matter and must be taken extremely seriously.
- We will implement the required measures needed to ensure a safe environment in all spaces where members, outside groups and staff may be present.
- If we encounter obstacles to implementing these measures, we will prioritize **safety over in-person gatherings** and will immediately consult with the District Superintendent for advice.
- We will promptly report any new outbreaks of Covid-19 within the congregation, outside groups, and staff to the District Superintendent.
- We will ensure our church is in compliance with all protocols for childcare and preschool activities and settings.
- We have checked with our insurance carrier for any special requirements.
- We have completed the “Worksheet for Protocol Planning and Preparation” and have attached all referenced plans to this covenant agreement.
- We will complete the Holston Annual Conference “Checklist for Worship Events” for each in-person worship event we host and keep the checklist on file in the church office.

Signature of Pastor

Date

Church Name

Trustee Chair

Date

Church Council Chair

Date

Worksheet for Protocol Planning and Preparation

What is your inventory of essential supplies?

- Cleaning supplies
- Masks (Ample supplies available for those who arrive without them)
- Hand sanitizer (with at least 60% alcohol)
- Soap
- Toilet Paper
- Cleansing Wipes
- Tissues
- No touch trash cans

Identify clearly named and trained “Cleaning Teams.”

- Develop your cleaning plan and place special emphasis on seating, doorknobs, railings, bathrooms, and other high-touch areas.
- Decide for cleaning of carpeting and other flooring prior to re-entry if deemed needed. This is not required but suggested as applicable.
- Check for potential mold buildup while the building has been closed and make plans to remove it.

Determine appropriate seating capacity and clearly identified paths of entry/exit.

- Calculate how many people your worship space can hold if every other pew is utilized and congregants are sitting in family groups six feet apart from one another.
- Create a plan for capping attendance when/if the sanctuary space reaches its’ **limited capacity**.
- Establish a plan to handle any parishioner who wishes to participate in worship without a mask and those who refuse to wear a mask and people who do not cooperate with social distancing.
- Make sure ventilation systems operate properly and increase circulation of outdoor air. We would suggest changing any air filters in your heating and cooling system before any in-person services are held.

Create/Purchase Signage that explains the following:

- How to stop the spread of Covid-19.
- Everyday protective measures such as hand washing, covering coughs, and sneezing, properly wearing a face covering and social distancing.
- Directional signs for entering and exiting the building for services if applicable given the size of your building.

Determine how you would handle a variety of specific circumstances:

- Develop a clearly communicated plan for building use agreements to reflect the results of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Contact your local insurance carrier to gain guidance on how to remain in compliance with their expectations, caution, and potential restrictions.
- Develop a plan for clearly communicating the restrictions/guidelines to all members of your congregation as well as those who utilize the building.
- Develop a plan for how you will communicate with the members of the congregation if someone develops Covid-19.
- Consider conducting a survey of the congregation to determine the degree and under what circumstances the members would feel comfortable returning to in-person worship.
- Develop a plan for taking attendance of those present for the purpose of being able to track if someone were to become sick or exposed. Proper notifications must be made to those in attendance as well as local Health Departments.
- Work with your leadership team to develop a plan for providing intentional spiritual and emotional care as well as counseling on a flexible, in person rotation or virtual basis. This would also require you to create a credible listing of print and in-person referrals.
- Enhance your awareness of parishioners and others in your community in need of food, medicine, and mental health support because of the pandemic. Also, be aware of the rise of domestic violence in your region.

Develop a plan for collection of the offering, including but not limited to:

- A stationary collection box. No passing of offering plates is allowed currently.
- Mail in offerings
- Electronic giving (Free online through Holston Conference and other recommended sites can be found on holston.org.)

Develop a plan for counting the offering including but not limited to:

- Gloves
- Disinfectants
- Deposit time frames with consideration of leaving the offering in a box for 2-3 days to reduce the risk of transmission.

Worship Checklist

This checklist shall be completed before each worship event and placed in a file maintained by the church office. You must check Holston.org frequently to ensure you have the most recent guidelines and checklist. In situations which require clarification, refer to the most recent update of the guidelines on holston.org and/or contact your District Superintendent.

Name of Church: _____

Person(s) completing this form: _____

Date of Event: _____

Type of Event

- Worship service
- Wedding
- Funeral
- Baptism
- Communion

General Information:

- The District Superintendent has approved the congregation's plan
- Online worship presence is offered
- Plans related to the Holston Annual Conference guidelines have been clearly communicated and signs are posted to assist participants' understanding of healthy practices.
- Care has been taken to identify and communicate with the following:
 - Persons who are feeling sick or have a positive diagnosis with Covid-19 are told to stay home.
 - Those who are in vulnerable age categories, live with vulnerable persons, or have pre-existing medical conditions are encouraged to stay home.
 - Cloth face coverings should not be placed on young children under age 2, anyone who has trouble breathing, or anyone who is unable to remove the mask without assistance. (These persons should remain home)
- Attendance must be taken and attached to this form so members can be informed if any attendees develop Covid-19.

I. Sanitation/Cleaning:

- Public spaces have been properly sanitized (especially high touch places like railings, door handles, seating, restrooms, etc...)
- Hymnals, attendance registers, and Bibles have been removed from pews
- Carpets/flooring have been cleaned **if deemed necessary**
- Abundant hand sanitizer is available (at least 60% alcohol)
- Restrooms are fully stocked with soap, toilet paper, and hand towels/driers. Only no touch trash cans are in use
- Doors and windows are left open when possible

II. Social Distancing/No Touch Protocols

- Masks are to be worn at all times by everyone present. The church should provide masks to those who do not have them
- Seating should be restricted to every other pew and pews not used should be marked as such. Families who live in the same household should sit together
- Plans for entry and exit of the building are clearly communicated and marked
- Capacity has been determined for worship space and plan is in place to cap attendance when the space reaches capacity.
- Offering is collected in a no touch manner
- Passing of the peace is excluded
- Children's moment is only included if children remain with their families, no children's handouts permitted
- Bulletins, if provided, are not handed out, but can be available for pick-up, printed at home, or placed in seats prior to the event.

III. **Suspended Activities**

- Choirs shall not be used during this time
- Baptisms must be approved in advance in consultation with the District Superintendent
- Congregational singing is not to take place at this time
- Receiving line (shaking the preacher's hand) and fellowship following the service is prohibited
- No fellowship, social hour, or fellowship meals will take place on church property
- Activities of the ushers/greeters are suspended except for those who will help guide entrants and/or disperse masks or sanitizer doing so as touch free as possible
- Altar calls and laying on of hands are not to be done due to proper social distancing requirements

IV. **Holy Communion (during the worship service)**

- Holy Communion through intinction or with the use of individual cups/ bread will not be administered in person until the threat of transmission is minimized. Proximity to those administering and those receiving communion poses an increased risk. Pre-made, self -service communion cups with bread inside the flap, may be used if made available upon entering the worship space. This will cause an increase burden on cleaning the sanctuary and might not be possible if multiple services are being conducted requiring thorough cleaning between services.
- **Online communion is still be permitted until such time as we determine when we can reassemble with no restrictions.**

V. **Additional Precautions Taken. Please list.**

Links for More Information

CDC Concerns for Closed Buildings

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/building-water-system.html>

Concern that COVID 19 is Airborne from 052820

https://www.webmd.com/lung/news/20200527/aerosol-scientist-covid19-is-likely-airborne?ecd=wnl_spr_052820&ctr=wnl-spr-052820_nsl-LeadModule_title&mb=HDwCw8lcf%2fGTotrfDZTBq2dEpmNqbUHLTIQp25jzt58%3d

Faith Based Organizations

https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019ncov/community/faithbased.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fphp%2Ffaith-based.html

People at Higher Risk

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-at-higher-risk.html>

Older Adults

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>

Extra Precautions

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/what-you-can-do.html>

Taking Care of Your Emotional Health

<https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/selfcare.asp>

24 Questions Church Should Answer Before People Return

<https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/374906-24-questions-your-church-should-answer-before-people-return.html>

Why Reopening a Church Is Different

<https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/why-reopening-a-church-is-different/>

Faith and Community Based FAQ

<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/3-17-20-faith-and-community-based-covid-19-faq.pdf>

Holston COVID-19 Task Force Members

Bishop Mary Virginia Taylor, Resident Bishop Holston Conference

Rev. Jeff Wright, Appalachian District Superintendent, Chair

Rev. Jane Taylor, Clinch Mountain District Superintendent

Rev. Hugh Kilgore, Hiwassee District Superintendent

Dr. Wesley Eastridge, Medical Doctor, Gate City, Virginia

Dr. Donna Robbins, Epidemiologist and Director of the Northeast Tennessee Health Department

Joy Eastridge, Parish Nurse at First Broad Street UMC, Kingsport, Tennessee

Rev. Anna Lee, Executive Pastor, Cokesbury UMC, Knoxville, Tennessee

Rev. Tom Ballard, Senior Pastor, Fountain City UMC, Knoxville, Tennessee

Rev. Leah Burns, Associate Pastor Second UMC, Knoxville, Tennessee

Rev. Dr. Tim Jones, Conference Director of Communications

Rev. Mike Sluder, Conference Director of Connectional Ministries

Becky Hall, Executive Director, Christ UMC, Chattanooga, Tennessee

John Eldridge, Conference Chancellor, Knoxville, Tennessee